

## The Romantic Rebel in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*

**Shohel Rana**

Assistant Professor in English  
 Uttara University, Bangladesh

### Abstract

Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* strives to challenge the existing ideologies of the society with the creation of a romantic rebel (Heathcliff) whose actions and behaviors question the cruelties and injustices of the families where he grew up as a child after being taken from Liverpool by Mr. Earnshaw. Heathcliff's eternal desires to be united with his beloved Cathy even after death shows that human beings' unconscious and fundamental desires cannot be restrained with any fixed belief or ideology. This article argues that Heathcliff's extremely unusual and apparently rough manners and rudeness are the outcome of the inhumane treatment that he suffered throughout his life. In order to establish the harmony with the nature of the transcendental soul which is free of any dogmatic principle, Heathcliff's actions are justified as being the representation of the greatness of the sense of freedom. This paper elaborates these notions by giving a background study of the concepts related to 'romanticism,' 'romantic rebel' and 'Byronic hero.' At the end, this write up concludes focusing on the joy of fulfillment in Heathcliff and Cathy's love relationship which is a clear contrast to the incompleteness that existed in Heathcliff and Cathy, connoting that Heathcliff's rebellion has become a success in another time frame.

**Key Words:** *Wuthering Heights*; romantic rebel; Heathcliff; social class; Cathy; haunting.

### I

Bronte sisters had to move to a hill-side area outside the mainstream of England because of their father's job. This, in turn, heavily influenced Emily Bronte to be attached to the nature and the few people who lived out there although she was not the type of a girl who used to talk much with the people. The loneliness and the emptiness around the moor made her extremely imaginative. As we know from her sister Charlotte Bronte's 1850 edition of preface to *Wuthering Heights*, the setting, the people and the story that we get from the text are the results of the powerful imagination and natural realities that were available in the place where Bronte sisters lived.

However, Emily Bronte was well aware of the social norms and ideologies that suppressed the individuals to flourish. *Wuthering Heights* is an attempt to represent the circumstances which were happenings in the life of the people of that society. Emily Bronte's rebel Heathcliff is a voice to the silenced men and women who suffered but could not rebel against the patriarchal restraints and beliefs. This paper explores the problems and possibilities of

a rebellion in a society which surrounds with Wuthering Heights and Thruscross Grange. It represents a final success of a great rebellion.

## II

Romanticism is not a term which can be defined without giving any contextual analysis. In fact, history shows that this term has been used by different people differently in different contexts. The following discussion (next four paragraphs) on romanticism is basically based on David Steven's book *Romanticism* which tries to approach romanticism from different perspectives. People had frustrations and disliking of the rational philosophies of the age of enlightenment and classicism which focused mainly on keeping everything under order. In every sector of life-politics, arts, music, architecture etc. people started to move towards the spirit of freedom. French revolution in 1789 had the impetus to change the world which was then turned to be a romantic world. The word 'romantic', however, carries a lot of connotation depending on the variety of contexts.

The word 'romance' which was basically originated in German ( a country which began the spirit of nationalism) and subsequently flourished in England , has strong influence in the creation of the concept of romanticism. In literature, romances-ballads, folk tales etc featured chivalrous deeds in past ages which included heroic figures which were later understood as romantic rebels like Milton's Satan, Shakespeare's Hamlet and Emily Bronte's Heathcliff etc. The word 'gothic' also has strong connection to 'romance.'

Romanticism is related to modernism in that it dismantles traditional values and established conventions. Writers of this age celebrate nature to save the world from the threat of urbanization. Individualism is celebrated while focusing on passion and unconsciousness. Heroic figures and heroic deeds are of superb significance. Byronic heroes are of that type of examples. Romantic writers celebrate the feeling instead of the choice of subject as Baudelaire said.

Kiely regards *Wuthering heights* as a romantic fiction. A romantic novel hints on the following things: rejection of literary conventions, escape and pursuit, irresistible passion, death as a psychological concern, dream and madness against social convention, unsatisfactory endings.

From these ideas of romance, romanticism, gothic and romantic rebel came the concept of Byronic hero (Child Harold, Don Juan) who is emotionally conflicted, arrogant, disrespectful of rank and privilege, mysterious, rebellious, self destructive and who is treated as an exile or outcast having a troubled past. This hero is a variant of romantic hero as a type of character named after the rebel poet Lord Byron.

## III

Throughout ages, we have seen heroes emerging to save his/her nation from chaos and frustrations. We have also seen rebels fighting with their cursed or troubled souls to find out ways to get rid of problems but remained confused and doomed either by fate or by tragic fault. Joan of Arc, King Arthur, Robin Hood, Tarzan, Spiderman, Superman and many others are figures who were romantic rebels either in real life or created in folk tales or ballads. People love

stories of legend because they are fed up with the fixed values of the society and they want to escape into heroic deeds.

In literature, we have also seen remarkable and universal characters like Shakespeare's Hamlet and Emily Bronte's Heathcliff who fit into many of the above mentioned features of a romantic rebel. The Wittenberg scholar Hamlet shows the infinity of the soul and the rebellious power of it to dismantle the existing corruption of the court while being extremely incapable to cope up with the realities. Heathcliff, on the other hand, is action oriented, 'rebellious, passionate, misanthropic, isolated and willful, have mysterious origins, lack family ties and rejects external restrictions.' (online)

From the beginning till the end of the novel, there are numerous things to make a simple little boy of a confused and unidentified origin, a romantic rebel, who would have a spirit of revenge and a destructive soul within his entire existence to break all the enmities of the world in Yorkshire where he and Cathy used to group up together in the moors.

Nobody knows for sure about the identity of Heathcliff. "A little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway" says Linton undermining Heathcliff's identity who is an outsider brought from Liverpool by Mr Earnshaw. Nelly inspires Heathcliff by saying "Who knows, but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen." Heathcliff's appearance in *Wuthering Heights* is also a matter of enigma. "It's as dark as if it came from a devil" says Mr Earnshaw after taking him as a "gift of god." This occasion makes Shakespeare's Caliban highlighted who was taken as rough and a beast but with dangerous power of subversion and threat to Prospero, the colonizer. *Wuthering Heights* shows the endless power of the suppressed and colonized people. Heathcliff grows in an unwelcoming environment with the seeds of destruction in the behaviors of the people around him. In response, he takes revenge with the same arms that were used to make him inferior and tortured as Caliban did "I will curse you with the language you have taught me" (*Tempest*).

Then, Hindley is always opposed to Heathcliff. His father's favourite Heathcliff is a lifelong enemy of Hindley who tries to separate Heathcliff from his only love and matter of existence, Cathy. Treated as a slave at *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's life finds meaning with Cathy whom he takes as "my heart's darling." However, this naturally built up relationship has got the seeds of Heathcliff's becoming a rebel because it is only for Cathy's marriage to Linton that Heathcliff's life loses its meaning and in turn makes him extremely doubtful of religion, society and moralities.

Linton treats Heathcliff very badly too. Heathcliff was not allowed to stay at Thruscross Grange on the night when Cathy was injured and taken inside Linton's house. It is because Linton considers him as inferior to their social status. The biggest frustration for Heathcliff, however, comes when Cathy, after returning from Thruscross Grange, confesses Nelly that she has accepted Linton's offer to marry him. "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff" says Cathy to Nelly. Although Heathcliff did not listen to Cathy's later words which may have change the course of the novel, he understands that the word "degrade" is enough to make a him feel that he is an outsider and does not belong to here; not even in Cathy's life.

Heathcliff disappeared and came back after three years with a mysterious romantic transformation. “ He had grown a tall, athletic, well formed man, beside whom my master seemed quite slender and youth like.....it looked intelligent and retained no mark of former degradation.....his manner was even dignified’ says Nelly. Heathcliff then starts taking dangerous revenge. He plans to marry Linton’s sister Isabella to gain the property of Thruscross Grange. He makes Hindley fall and gain the property of Wuthering Heights too. He loses sympathy even for his most close ones except Cathy. He even mistreats Hearton and Junior Cathy.

However, his love for Cathy is extraordinary. His becoming a romantic rebel is the result of losing Cathy in the hand of society’s standards (Cathy marries Linton because ‘he is handsome, rich and nice to be with’). It is this supernatural love that makes Heathcliff a romantic rebel having the potential of great power of regeneration. This love is so transcendental that Heathcliff tries to unfold the coffin where Cathy is kept after death. He believes that he will be united with Cathy after death. Cathy compares her love for Heathcliff with eternal rocks “ my love for Heathcliff is like the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff.” “Two words would comprehend my future—*death and hell*—existence , after losing her , would be hell” says Heathcliff. Heathcliff’s frustrations increase with the passage of time. “ You teach me how cruel you’ve been—cruel and false. Why did you despise me ? Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy?’ Heathcliff’s restlessness becomes more prominent and devastating before the death of Cathy. “ Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest, as long as I am living! You said I killed you—haunt me then! The murdered do haunt their murderers. I believe—I know that ghosts have wandered on earth. Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh God! It is unutterable!”.

#### IV

Then, after the tragic death of Cathy, Heathcliff also dies after a few years; probably in the age of 38 or 37. Many people around the moors say that they see the ghosts of Cathy and Heathcliff roaming around the moors. However, at the end, we see a real transformation of the entire story in the love relationship of Junior Cathy and Hearton Earnshaw. Although Heathcliff did not want to have any sort of soft corner for Hearton, he somehow found himself having good affection for Hearton because Hearton has been brought up as an orphan who lost his parents at an early age like Heathcliff. Junior Cathy’s love interest for Hearton shows that ultimately, this text finds a satisfaction in fulfilling its urge to make a fruitful relationship between two people of two different social classes : one orphan ( Hearton) and the another is the daughter of the magistrate Linton ( Junior Cathy).

These haunting atmospheres, gothic settings, madness, superhuman behaviors, revenge against norms, mysterious origins, identity crisis make Heathcliff the center of the rebellion. This paper tries to explore the talents of the romantic rebels to subvert the existing discourses which make people inferior and keep the society under fixed values and morals. Through the potentials of Heathcliff, this text shows how the order could be reversed with the change of the ideologies.

### Works Cited

Bronte, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Thomas Cautley Newby, Publisher. 72 mortimer ST Cavendish sq.1847. Print.

‘The Romantic Novel, Romanticism and *Wuthering heights*.’ Online.October 24, 2005.  
[http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel\\_19c/wuthering/romantic.html](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/romantic.html)

Stevens, David. *Romanticism*. Cambridge. Context in Literature. January 15, 2004.

Byron, George. *Don Juan*. 1819. [ Online]

Byron, George. *Child Harold Pilgrimage*. 1812.[ Online]

Varghese, Lata Marina, Dr. ‘Stylistic Analysis of Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*.’ Journal of Humanities and Social Science.